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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR HOLMES PRESS BRIEFING

REF: Kinshasa 1073

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During his briefing with local press on December 14, Ambassador Anthony Holmes, AFRICOM Deputy to the Commander for Civil-Military activities, stated that AFRICOM seeks to help African countries build capacity in security sector in order to more effectively protect their own civilians, sovereignty, and resources.

Holmes also described U.S.-DRC military cooperation programs, emphasizing partnership, and stressing protection of civilians and respect for human rights, as well as the importance of rule of law and transparency. Coverage was positive, establishing a good opportunity for enhanced dialogue with local press and opinion leaders concerning U.S.-DRC military cooperation. End summary.

¶2. (U) Ambassador Holmes emphasized that AFRICOM had no intentions of establishing a headquarters in Africa, nor to have any permanent bases on the continent. He made a clear statement that AFRICOM seeks to help African countries build capacity in the security sector in order to more effectively protect their own civilians, sovereignty, and resources. Holmes emphasized that while the USG was willing to help African nations achieve these important goals, it would do so only in partnership and upon invitation by host countries. He also stressed the protection of the civilian population and human rights, respect for rule of law and transparency, as well as cooperation with the international community. Holmes made clear that the Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) being trained in Kisangani was meant to create a model battalion that could then train other units.

¶3. (SBU) Press coverage of the briefing was generally positive. "AFRICOM is Ready to Support Security Sector Reform in the DRC," read the headline over a back page article in Le Potentiel on December 15. The article noted that the LIB will go on to train other units in the FARDC, with a particular emphasis on protecting civilian populations and respecting human rights. (Note: Le Potentiel is often critical of the U.S., other Western nations and international organizations. At the same time, Le Potentiel frequently cites SSR as a high priority for the DRC, and is generally receptive to USG SSR activities. End note.)

¶4. (U) On December 15, the pro-government newspaper L'Observateur's front-page headline noted "U.S. will provide \$35 million for FARDC Capacity Building." Ambassador Holmes's photo was also published on the front page. The article focused on the LIB training, AFRICOM efforts to fight HIV/AIDS in the local military, cooperation with international partners in security sector reform, and the fact that AFRICOM has no intention of establishing a headquarters or bases in Africa. Ambassador Holmes is quoted as saying: "We want above all to see the Congolese Army use its own members to train the soldiers who will make up an army that is professional and will integrate the concepts of respecting human rights and protecting civilian populations - an army that will apply itself to putting an end to

the culture of impunity." The article can be found at <http://www.lobservateur.cd/>.

¶5. (U) The pro-government L'Avenir's December 15 edition ran a front page headline "DRC-USA: AFRICOM for a Professional Army in the DRC."

A sub-headline highlighted Ambassador Holmes's statement: "AFRICOM will respect the sovereignty of the DRC and has no intention of Qwill respect the sovereignty of the DRC and has no intention of establishing a permanent military presence against the will of the government or Congolese people." The nearly full-page jump article reported that Ambassador Holmes cited security as the greatest challenge facing the DRC; emphasized respect for human rights and rule of law; stressed the importance of building judicial capacity; described AFRICOM's role as working in partnership with host governments; and expressed the hope that the DRC will work with the USG and other international partners to achieve effective SSR. The newspaper also ran the full text of Ambassador Holmes's biography, along with his photograph. The article can be found at http://www.groupe.lavenir.cd/spip.php?article2_9692 .

¶6. (U) National television and radio station RTNC attended the press briefing, but as of the afternoon of December 15 had not yet aired any reports, as they are assembling a more detailed package to be broadcast in the near future. (Post will advise when that report airs.) Radio Okapi was invited to the press briefing, but the reporter was not able to attend, due to logistic difficulties.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: The press coverage of Ambassador Holmes' briefing was overwhelmingly positive, and provided a good basis for continued outreach and discussion with local press and opinion leaders. Local opinion of AFRICOM and US-DRC military cooperation is often fraught with misperceptions (see reftel). These misperceptions include:

KINSHASA 00001099 002 OF 002

speculation that AFRICOM is seeking a headquarters or permanent bases in Africa; civilian and civil society distrust of local military, and by consequence, USG military training and cooperation programs; the widespread view that USG strategy is closely tied to economic interests, and aims to destabilize or even break up the DRC; and the feeling that the U.S. has historically sided with Rwanda and/or other countries in the Great Lakes Region against the DRC. PAS Kinshasa plans to work in close coordination with OSC, DAO, AFRICOM, AF PD/PA and other colleagues in developing an effective public diplomacy strategy for outreach and communications concerning SSR and related activities. End comment.

¶8. (U) Ambassador Holmes cleared on this cable.

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